

**SUMMARY OF  
THE ROUNDTABLE  
ON  
REFORM AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT  
IN THE MUSLIM WORLD**



**HELD ON  
MARCH 20, 2003**

## Purpose

The National Committee on American Foreign Policy (NCAFP) was founded in 1974 by Professors Hans J. Morgenthau and George D. Schwab and others to serve as a nonprofit, independent foreign policy think tank to help shape U.S. foreign policy. Among members are experts from the worlds of diplomacy and academia and leaders from business and the professions.

*The purpose of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy is to identify and articulate American foreign policy interests from a nonpartisan perspective within the framework of political realism. American foreign policy interests include:*

*Preserving and strengthening national security*

*Supporting countries committed to the values and the practice of political, cultural, and religious pluralism*

*Improving U.S. relations with the developed and developing worlds*

*Advancing human rights*

*Encouraging realistic arms-control agreements*

*Curbing the proliferation of nuclear and other unconventional weapons*

*Promoting an open and global economy*

A distinguishing activity of the NCAFP is the publication of firm, reasoned positions designed to help formulate U.S. foreign policy. When, after study and discussion, the Committee or one of its study groups reaches a consensus on an aspect of foreign policy that affects American national interests, the NCAFP makes that judgment known to the administration, Congress, the media, and the general public.



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May 15, 2003

Dear Reader:

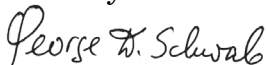
On March 20, 2003, the National Committee on American Foreign Policy convened the third closed-door and off-the-record roundtable on the Middle East. The first roundtable of Muslim scholars, former diplomats, and specialized journalists addressed the question “Can Muslims Accept Israel in Their Midst?” (May 9, 2001); the second the issue of “Militant Islamic Fundamentalism in the 21st Century” (January 10, 2002); and the third the problem of “Reform and Human Development in the Muslim World.”

Several threads run through the three roundtable reports: (1) The mind-set of many of the people of the Middle East has not changed significantly for some time. (2) The underdevelopment of the countries in the region is self-inflicted. (3) Women must be emancipated and given equal rights. (4) Major U.S. and other Western educational efforts are needed to help the region lift itself out of backwardness and become receptive to new ways of thinking. (5) The Muslim intellectuals living in the West must be mobilized to help bring about necessary reforms and human development. (6) It is impossible, according to the strict interpretation of the *sharia* (Islamic law), for Muslims to engage in strategic coexistence with Israel or with the “infidel” Christian West.

Most of the National Committee’s roundtable findings anticipated the excellent but underutilized report of Arab experts titled “Arab Human Development,” which was published in 2002 (after the appearance of the National Committee’s reports of the first two roundtables) by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP).

For major support of the third roundtable the National Committee is especially grateful to Mutual of America, Mrs. Eugenie Fromer, and Sheila Robbins. The National Committee also acknowledges the generous support given to us by Kenneth J. Bialkin, Esq., the Edith C. Blum Foundation, Sandy Frank, Joan Peters, and Clarence B. Schwab.

Sincerely



George D. Schwab  
President

## Introduction

**T**he tragic events of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent all-out war against international terrorism have once again highlighted the dangers of militant Islamic fundamentalism. Some observers relate terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda to strains of strict and literal interpretations of the religion. Others offer a host of economic, social, and psychological explanations. All agree that the lag between the Muslim world in general and Arab countries in particular and other regions in terms of economic and social development constitutes the basic cause of unrest and violence. Bin Laden, Khomeini, and their predecessors pinpointed modernity and democracy as the “enemies of Islam” and advocated a holy war against “infidels.”

The question of modernity and reform has preoccupied Muslim intellectuals, political leaders, and religious authorities since the early 19th century. In recent years it has become more acute, pitting religious radicals against progressive elements as well as foreigners. In a way, it is at the heart of mounting terrorist activities and therefore has become a concern in foreign policy planning. That is why the National Committee on American Foreign Policy thought it appropriate to convene a roundtable consisting of several Muslim intellectuals who are experts in this field and a number of interested participants and observers. The subject proposed to the panelists was “Reform and Human Development in the Muslim World.”

The purpose of this not-for-attribution report is to make available to the foreign policy community the views and suggestions that were voiced at the March 20, 2003, roundtable.

### Presentations

One participant reminded the roundtable that in 1992 the Norwegian Institute of Human Rights hosted a seminar on “Human Rights and the Modern Application of Islamic Law.” The papers presented were published a year later under the title “Islamic Law Reform and Human Rights: Challenges and Rejoinders.” The point of departure was a 1990 study by Professor Abdullahi An Naim, “Toward an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights, and International Law,” which contained some controversial answers to the problems of modernity in the Muslim world. The editors of the Norwegian Institute’s publication noted that “a main concern at the Oslo

seminar is the question of structural modernization of the Muslim world and how processes of modernization are served by the rise of democratic institutions and the cultivation of political toleration and pluralism.” The editors added that processes of modernization in the Muslim world often face harsh circumstances from the “setting for much of the contemporary Islamic resurgence.” By the phrase “Islamic resurgence” they meant Islamic fundamentalism or radicalism.

Reforming Islamic law and institutions is not a new proposal. It was considered by Muslim intellectuals in the mid-19th century. For example, Jamal ad Din Afghani met Ernest Renan in Paris and discussed modern science and Islam with him. When he returned to Egypt with his disciple, Sheikh Abdo, they wrote about the subject. But the religious establishment opposed their ideas. Curiously enough, no reformist movement grew up around their ideas.

In 2002 the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) published a report on “Arab Human Development,” prepared by a group of well-known Arab experts who attributed the sorry state of Arab societies to a “freedom deficit,” discrimination against women, and poor education, among other things. On international measurements of government accountability, civil liberties, political rights, and media freedom, Arab countries scored lower than those in any other region in the world. The authors of the report urge free elections, strengthening local government, loosening bureaucratic controls, and promoting a free press. They call for the rule of law, respect for human rights, the establishment of an independent judiciary, and many other things.

The participant added that in February 2003 King Abdullah of Jordan, in a speech at the annual international economic meeting in Davos (Switzerland), maintained that in the “Golden Age” of the Muslim world, “an era of rationalism, liberal tradition, and culture brought about unprecedented excellence in science, medicine, and philosophy.” The Arab ruler linked the decline of the Islamic world to the rise of orthodoxy that championed “predestination over reason and free will.” He called for a return to liberal ideas in Islam. Although welcoming the king’s remarks, the participant maintained that reform cannot be imposed from the top. It needs to be debated by the people after a long preparation. He expressed the hope that other panelists would discuss this question, especially the points raised in the

UNDP report.

Another panelist affirmed that there is no such thing as a Muslim world. There are 57 countries in which the majority religion is Islam. These countries have not been able to come up with a unified position on a single issue. Moreover, most of them are run by undemocratic regimes. Islam, in fact, comprises many different sects, and there are Muslims in many other countries. Nevertheless, both Muslims and non-Muslims continue to speak about Islam as if it were a monolith. One reason is semantics. In the case of Christians, there are two words: *Christianity*, the religion as such, and *Christendom*, the community of existential practitioners of the religion. In the case of Islam, there is only one word. For instance, in September 2001 the indication that the hijackers were Muslims was construed by many Muslims as an attack on their religion, whereas Christendom can be subjected to social and political criticism without provoking such reactions. In Muslim countries every discussion becomes theological, enabling oppressors to hide behind the theological façade that serves to protect them against typical political and social criticism. Unfortunately, this situation has also spread to Western democracies where any criticism of Islam has become taboo. Even the U.S. president said on 9/11 that bin Laden was not a “true” Muslim. One must make a distinction between Islam as a belief system and Islam as an existential reality that is open to political and social criticism. We have to consider Muslim countries individually and shape policies in accordance with the realities of each country. One cannot apply a single policy to all Muslim countries. In addition, there are Muslims who put the adjective “Islamic” before a word, which makes it senseless, as, for example, “Islamic democracy,” “Islamic human rights,” and “Islamic physics.” Setting aside the terms “Islamic” and “fundamentalist” may offer an insight into the situation of particular countries such as Iran. To this participant so-called Islamic radicalism is nothing else than a form of “generic” fascism. In this regard, he submitted a paper in which he stated that “the 1979 revolution and the system it created (in Iran) must be regarded as the product of a large-scale mimetic enterprise. It is a violent intrusion into [the] Iranian reality of Western dystopian ideas and methods that can be explained in terms of “generic” fascism. Among the characteristics of “generic” fascism, he cited totalitarianism, a cult of tradition, a rejection of modernism, a cult of the chief, a hatred of democracy, a readiness to use terrorism.

In the opinion of one participant, religion has evoked an increasing appeal in the Middle East. He stated that eight centuries of Islam in Spain evaporated because Muslims failed to create any kinds of institutions. The Americas constitute a very religious continent and can deal better than Europe with the Muslim world. Very soon Islam will become the second faith in the United States. It is very important for the United States to develop opportunities for the creation of American Muslim “role models”: members of Congress, politicians in both parties, diplomats, top military officers, and others. Genuine Islamic seminaries should be set up not only to gain total independence from Middle Eastern seminaries but also to influence the evolution of Muslims abroad. American Muslim scholars could help propagate the values of democracy and pluralism in Muslim countries. The United States could sponsor institutions that provide safe havens for Muslim thinkers who cannot survive and publish in Middle Eastern repressive regimes. At the present time there are no exchanges of ideas among Arab, Turkish, Persian, and Urdu Muslim intellectuals. The United States should support the free media in indigeneous languages in order to break the control most Muslim states impose on the public. It should also fund translations and publications that foster mutual understanding. This panelist added that American institutions such as universities can afford to engage in what he called international institution building by hiring available doctors and technicians from the third world in order to create medical schools in other countries. Referring to his Iranian origin and experience, he underlined important recent transformations in Iran such as self-criticism, which are lacking in other Muslim countries. He also indicated the links between “Sufism” and the spread of democratic values in Iran and some other Muslim countries. This panelist submitted several short papers expounding his ideas: “Institution Building Is a Must”; “Why the Moderates of the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish Faiths Must Unite”; “Iran Will Reform the Islamic World and [Islamic] Views.”

Another panelist underlined the role that women must play in any project of reform and human development in the Muslim world and recounted her experiences as a child in Egypt and as a teenager in Britain and Saudi Arabia that had led her to become a “Muslim feminist.” The panelist called attention to the existence of large groups of women from Egypt and other Muslim countries who challenge male dominance and misogyny in current interpretations of the Koran and hold women back in



practicing their religion. Women scholars are reinterpreting the scriptures in a more equalitarian way. The panelist reminded the roundtable that the UNDP report on Arab Human Development 2002 concentrates on the miscast role of women as one of the three causes of the failure of the Arab world. No discussion of reform or human development can proceed without emphasizing the education of women to achieve awareness of all their rights, including religious and political, and making it possible for them to participate in and contribute to all aspects of their societies.

The same panelist added that winds of change are already blowing in some parts of the Muslim world. According to the panelist, the Egyptian TV series called *A Horseman Without a Horse* was criticized by many American Jewish organizations as anti-Semitic because it upheld as true the so-called *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Some people in Cairo said: "How dare they ask us to censor this program when they say they value freedom of expression." What was new was a report issued by the Egyptian Organization of Human Rights that included the following recommendation: "Let's not talk about censoring this program but instead make it clear at the start that this work (*The Protocol . . .*) is a forgery." Its representatives said that prejudice against Jews, Christians, or any other religious group should not be encouraged in the post-September 11, 2001, world where Muslims around the world face discrimination. We must talk about rights for Muslims in the context of offering equal rights to everybody. Such a reaction from an organization concerned with human rights represents an important step forward because it departs from the characteristic talk of the Muslim world that is framed in conspiracy theories. This is where Muslims in the United States and those around the world can help one another. The more American Muslims affirm that civil liberties are important, the more that affirmation allows Muslims around the world to understand and appreciate the essential role played by human rights. This participant concluded that we must encourage the notion of reciprocity and the universality of human rights, citing the program run at Emory University by Professor Abdullahi An-Naim in which he trains fellows invited from Muslim countries who return home and organize discussions on the subject. Muslims always feel that their rights are being violated by others and don't consider the universal angle of the problem.

One participant said that from Jamal ad Din Afghani onward,

talk has been going on about reform inside and outside the Muslim world. Two things, however, are often confused: the reform of society and the reformulation of interpretations of scriptures. The most important value in Islam is justice, but there is no justice in the Muslim world. Other important values are equality and respect. But they are not to be found. Muslim realities are divorced from Islamic principles. There is no direct causal relationship between what the average Muslim thinks and what actually happens in the Muslim world. Therefore when we talk about reform, we should choose a more empirical than ideological approach. According to a *New York Times* article, only 26 percent of Americans believe in evolution. Fourteen percent of the people, including the president, believe that the earth was created 6,000 years ago. We are worried about the medieval values of Islam while the president and the followers of Jerry Springer and Jerry Falwell wallow in premedieval irrationalism.

In the opinion of this participant, the easiest way to prevent reform in the Muslim world is to attack Islam. So-called Islamic research is a very insecure response to the West's "global domination." The Muslim world and the United States are very similar in their attitudes toward the world. They both believe in their manifest destinies. They want to reconstruct the world in their own images. When we look at the Muslim world, we need to look at certain positive aspects. Today the Muslim world is producing "new Muslim intellectuals" who represent something unique because they know their own tradition as well as Western traditions.

This participant referred to a book by Bassam Tibi, a Muslim scholar living in Europe, who has concluded that European Muslims can become a bridge between the Muslim and Western worlds if they change some of their ways. A free society, he remarked, should be tolerant by definition. Why should Muslims change their values? This participant said that after September 11, he had seen the "dark side" of democracy manifested in the restrictions and discrimination imposed on Muslims in America. In his view, the problem of security compromises freedom and leads to the conclusion that there cannot be democracy, freedom, and tolerance amid feelings of insecurity; if the United States, with all its might, feels insecure, then what about the Muslim world that has been under siege for more than 150 years?

The participant concluded that the first thing that has to

change is the nature of worldwide security management. One country cannot become secure by making others feel insecure. When one is secure, one is open to criticism internally and externally. Today it is impossible to be critical of U.S. policies because the country is insecure. In order to have reform in the Muslim world, an “avalanche” of self-criticism is needed. For that to happen, Muslims will need to feel secure. From that perspective, the best gift that the United States can offer to the Muslim world is the recounting of the experiences of American Muslims whose achievements and prosperity are proof that the United States is not opposed to Islam. America should explain to the Muslim world that it has certain strategic interests and worries about the security of both the United States and the Muslim world.

Another panelist affirmed that a clear-cut framework has not been devised for thinking about the Muslim world. It is a very large and diverse place that contains many different linguistic, religious, social, and political components. Yet there are also elements that unite it. First, it is, by and large, an authoritarian world. Second, it is patriarchal and misogynistic. Third, it is a world in which education at all levels is utterly bankrupt. Fourth, religion has become constitutive to the identity of the people; it has become a political idiom because of the bankruptcy of ideologies such as nationalism, liberalism, and socialism. Some very wealthy states such as the Gulf States, in particular Saudi Arabia, have been pushing their agendas, including a literalist approach to the understanding and interpretation of revelation. This approach has become dominant because of funding and the fact that literalism has become an antidote to certain problems that Muslims think they are facing, namely, military, intellectual, social, and political weakness. They see the answer to weakness in a return to the “true” sources, the true interpretations. Because there is not a single authority to tell which interpretation is the “true” one, the process has become a fight over who speaks authoritatively. Although contradictory, it tends to espouse violent forms and culminate in pious statements made by Muslim scholars and jurists: Democracy is consultative discussion (*shoura*) and is therefore compatible with Islam; Islam is really about justice; and so on. It is a kind of metalanguage for talking about the problems of Islam.

This participant said he would rather try to define the position of the United States vis-à-vis the Muslim world and the crisis that exists in it. Is this a crisis internal to the Muslim

world or a fight in which Americans are participants? And if we (Americans) are participants, what is our role? And what are our goals? The participant said he thought that there are goals shared by Americans and Muslims. For example, it would be very nice to see a liberal Islam emerge beyond the level of pious statements. By institutionalizing practices, Muslims will enable themselves to engage with one another and with the outside world in ways that are tolerant of differences, accept dissent, are gender neutral (or at least favor women's employment), and so on. It will take at least one generation to achieve those goals. He expressed optimism and cited the case of Turkey and what is happening in Iran. He added that what will be done in Iraq will be of crucial importance for the fate of liberalism and democracy in the whole region. There are piecemeal changes and very specific issues that should be addressed. One of the key ways in which America can help is to instigate reform in education throughout the Muslim world, which is based on rote memorization in which students are never asked to think critically about the text they are asked to memorize.

# Discussion

## **The Palestinian Problem**

A panelist expressed the opinion that there will be no peace in the Middle East until the Arab world accepts the existence of a Jewish state side by side with a Palestinian state. The Palestinians should also reform that part of their society that wants to extinguish Israel. Another participant noted that there is no direct connection between the war against terrorism and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Nevertheless, the argument seems to focus on the question of how to resolve that conflict.

One observer, agreeing with that observation, asked the panelists whether a settlement would have a bearing on reform and human development in the rest of the Muslim world. A participant answered that every government in the Muslim and Arab worlds has used the problem as a red herring in order to defer concentrating on reform and human development at home. Those governments have co-opted the problem and have encouraged their people to obsess about it. Another participant confirmed that the Arab-Israeli conflict has nothing to do with the question of underdevelopment in the Muslim world. Another went further and asserted that the Arab world does not care for Palestinians and is bothered by the fact that it has been defeated three times and therefore has been humiliated. If it cared for the Palestinians, it would have allowed them to migrate to Arab countries. If Israel did not exist, the frustration of the masses would be directed against their own governments. In the opinion of that participant, the question of Jerusalem is far more serious to Muslims than that of the Palestinians. When the Arab-Israeli crisis is resolved, there will be no more excuses for the lack of development and progress in the Arab world. Another panelist stated that the Israeli-Palestinian issue is an extremely emotional one in the sense that when a Muslim sees on his TV screen a Palestinian mistreated, he feels humiliated, as if this had happened to his brother or another member of his family. In fact, though, the Palestinian situation is not a mobilizing theme for Al Qaeda. In countries such as Lebanon and Syria, Palestinians are treated in abysmal ways. Many Arab regimes will not survive once peace with Israel is signed.

## **Feelings of Insecurity**

Referring to Muslims' feelings of persecution that were men-

tioned by one of the presenters, an observer compared such perceptions to those of Jews facing anti-Semitism. He said that he understood Muslims in the West defending themselves against unfair criticism and measures they consider unjust. In his opinion, one has to uncover the deeper reasons why Muslims feel that way and provide for all Muslims a “sense of advocacy of rights.” But in doing so, matters of principle such as women’s rights, individual freedoms, the right of dissent, and so on should be highlighted.

One participant, citing the Spanish Inquisition, the Holocaust, the massacre of Tutsis by Hutus, and ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Kosovo extrapolated a kind of “relationship between Christianity and genocide” and something “genocidal” in the West in general. He added that 14 million Americans believe in the end of time and in an Armageddon in which all Muslims will be killed and Jews will be converted to Christianity. In comparison, episodes involving such terrorists as bin Laden or Hamas look like picnics. The same participant alluded to Pat Robertson’s anti-Islamic comments and the silence of the White House about them. All this appears scary to Muslims here and elsewhere. Westerners seize on one issue and reason in the following way: “Either we did something bad to them, or they are crazy,” and they assume they have done nothing and therefore absolve American foreign policy.

An observer remarked that there are in the United States and other democracies “homicidal” people; the fact that Hitler committed genocide doesn’t mean that all Christianity and all Western societies should be condemned. Nor should any religion be condemned because some of its strains or branches or individual practitioners are so obsessed that they kill for something they believe in. There may be millions of Americans who believe in Armageddon, but they would not lift a sword or fire a gun to kill someone who disagrees with them. Americans have accepted that those kinds of disagreements, even between Pat Robertson and the president or between Pat Buchanan and the president, are resolved in the public arena of discourse or by the ballot box, not by the sword. The president did not condemn Islam—only those strains in Islam that would resort to the sword against those who disagree with them. Unfortunately, there has not arisen from the world of Islam the kind of condemnation of terrorism that should be voiced. There is in Islam a sliver that would use the sword, and such people should be banished—by the sword if necessary.

A participant said that as long as the Muslim world feels insecure, it will not be prepared to change. It will cling to its traditional practices no matter how debilitating they are because it believes that its identity and core values are at stake. Muslims feel that Islam is under attack, especially in light of military action in the Middle East. Under such circumstances the Muslim world will not be willing to change.

Several participants remarked that no authority in the West and particularly in the United States means to attack Islam and Muslims. Measures of security after the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the war against the Taliban regime and Al Qaeda were not directed against Islam and Muslims but against terrorists who proclaim their intention of harming Americans and American interests. The United States is acting in self-defense against terrorist associations and has taken pains to differentiate them from other Muslims. American Muslims as well as friendly Muslim governments should explain the U.S. position to their coreligionists.

One participant reminded the panel of the distinction that a presenter drew between Christianity and Christendom; in Islam such a distinction does not exist, and any criticism of the public sphere of Islam is immediately construed as an attack against the religion itself. In the opinion of that participant, it would be a mistake to curtail criticism of the public sphere of Islam in order to accommodate Muslim sensibilities. At any rate, this situation underlines the necessity of separating religion from government.

### **Secularism, Democracy, Pluralism**

One participant observed that the objective of the roundtable is not to focus on the ideals implicit in the religion but on practical realities in Muslim societies. He urged the panel to stop mixing theology and politics and acknowledge the fact that the heritage of the Enlightenment is the heritage of Muslims themselves. It is difficult if not impossible to distinguish in the cultures of Muslim countries the part that comes from the Greeks. It is ultimately artificial to divide the world into West and non-West. Such an exercise constitutes an excuse for justifying tyranny and despotism, for accepting one-party systems in the name of religion, for terrorizing people who want to think differently, and for denying them the “public space” they are entitled to. Democracies, more than any other regime, should not fall into the trap of “postmodernism” that maintains that to be

different is to have an intrinsic value. The world cannot allow dictators to hold their nations hostage and to brutalize people in the name of national independence and sovereignty. Muslim countries are part of the world; they should be brought into it and made contemporaries.

Another participant said that freedom is needed more than formal democracy. Freedom means that the people, whatever the form of their government, are guaranteed basic rights, as specified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In the case of Iraq, it is more important to provide to the people a Bill of Rights that will guarantee freedom than to impose on them a particular form of government.

On the question of secularism, one panelist observed that at the present time two “nonworking” models of relations between religion and government exist in the Muslim world. Model one is based on Iran where religion, in the person of clerics in high-ranking administrative positions, controls politics. It is a failure. The other model is Saudi Arabia where religion is controlled by politics. It too is a failure. Younger generations as well as clerics are dissatisfied in both societies. According to this panelist, Iranian youth have strayed from faith, and the society today is more secular than ever. A third model, in which the religious establishment will not be involved directly in politics and will function as a kind of nongovernmental organization, is forming. Curiously enough, it is now the opinion of a majority of clerics and other Muslim intellectuals in Iran that religion should be separate from politics. The panelist added that in Iran mysticism is widespread through poetry. The message of mysticism is pluralistic and holds a tolerant worldview.

Another panelist wondered whether Muslim countries will have to go through the experience of Iran under a Khomeini-like regime before religion can find its proper place. In his opinion, that place resides in informing politics indirectly, much the same function as it fills in democratic countries.

In relation to this question, a participant appealed to others not to give the impression that in Iran there is anything resembling democracy. All the so-called dissidents who have spoken against some aspects of the regime are in the same ideological camp. He conceded that in the Iranian camp there is more freedom than there is in the similar camp in Saudi Arabia but remarked that nobody outside that camp is given a



chance to speak. The mullahs, he said, are reaching the end of their rope. The majority of Shiite clerics are opposed to the regime, which is in fact a fascist regime. There is an attempt in the Muslim world to make the “public space” sacred, a dangerous thing under all circumstances. The main problem is the lack of freedom. The West as well as Muslim reformers should focus its attention on helping civil societies. In some countries such as Iraq, civil societies have been destroyed. Reformers should also help individuals who create art and culture. In Iran before the Islamic Revolution, the Pahlavi University in Teheran was created in conjunction with Pennsylvania University: 90 percent of the militant terrorist leaders that followed and supported Khomeini came from that university. Almost all the members of the present Iranian leadership were trained in the United States. The solution is to *open* Muslim societies and let them muddle their way through. In the final analysis the problem is the lack of freedom. The United States and other Western democracies should boycott despotic regimes and help their opponents.

The same participant suggested a kind of “lukewarm” war against despotic states that are members of the UN but do not honor the principles of its Charter despite the fact that they have signed it. The leaders of those countries also violate their own constitutions and steal the riches of their countrymen. Several panelists expressed the view that in each of these countries basic cultural elements exist that can serve as links to democratic institutions. For instance, ancient pre-Islamic mythology, which remains alive in Iran, contains elements that highlight some of the most essential democratic principles.

An observer, picking up the idea that the Muslim world has lost the last 800 years, remarked that this coincided with the closing of the doors of *Ijtihad* (continuous effort of understanding) commanded by the Koran. He wondered how the closing could be undone in order to allow new interpretations and modern reforms in societies. One participant said that *Ijtihad* means free reasoning and it is practiced in the Shiite world at least. It was closed in the Sunni world. Because of that the majority of Iranian clerics are standing up in opposition and criticizing the so-called Islamic government. He gave the example of Ayatollah Montazeri who was ranked second in the regime that came to power after the Islamic Revolution but was demoted by Khomeini because of his criticism. At least in Iran public criticism is helping to bring about reform within Islamic

society. It has opened a way to introduce all kinds of secular ventures into the body of Islamic faith. Another observer, referring to the United States, remarked that although freedom of religion is assured, the democratic system does not allow any religion to dominate and control the state. Secularism and constitutional freedoms override any religion, unlike the situation in many Muslim societies in which religious power is indistinguishable from government power.

### **The Status of Women**

An observer, citing the example of Bangladesh where women were elected president and prime minister, wondered what made that country different from many other Muslim countries where the accession of women to such high political positions seemed impossible. In response a participant said that the situation of women in Muslim countries varies greatly. An example cited was Egypt, where, in contrast with most Muslim countries, women face genital mutilation, which is not prescribed in any Islamic texts but is promoted by some clerics. Another example is the head scarf that is forbidden in government buildings and schools in Turkey. In Malaysia and Indonesia, women can recite the Koran on television, whereas in many Arab countries the mere idea of a woman singing or speaking in public is considered shameful. Concerning the question of leadership, in Asian countries such as Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and the Philippines, women who acceded to very high positions came from families in which their fathers or brothers were very active in politics, and so they were accepted as part of the ruling elite. It was not so much that the society accepted the idea of a woman as prime minister or president but the fact that she was the daughter or the sister of such a leader. In Malaysia and Indonesia, the practice of women reciting the Koran in public also helped.

The same panelist added that the situation is a little different in Turkey. There has been more public debate in Turkey, and the clerics have approached Islam in a different way because they have both the secular and the religious strains to deal with. They also have discussed such issues as the marriage of Muslim women to non-Muslim men, which is taboo in other Muslim countries. They show respect for democracy and tolerance probably because they want to join the European Union. At any rate, the Turkish trend will help all Muslim women.

Another panelist brought up the example of Iran, where, after

the Islamic Revolution and their strict treatment, women took the matter into their own hands and pushed for reforms from within. Within the past four years, the number of women at all universities has reached 65 percent of the student population. The fact that Iranian women are becoming more educated than men is a phenomenal development in the Muslim world. There are now activist women who are not afraid to speak out and professional women who contribute to all walks of life.

## **Education**

A panelist stated that the United States has the worst system of public schools and, at the same time, the greatest universities in the world. The best thing America can do for the development of the Muslim world is to promote its culture of liberal arts education, which is missing in the third world, especially in Arab countries. Indeed, the culture addresses *inter alia* serious questions such as the role of religion in society. Muslims have never had an opportunity to discuss this question in a structured fashion. They are expected to accept authoritative sources handed down to them. The United States should create universities like the ones in Beirut, Cairo, Karachi, Lahore, and Peshawar. The Muslim world needs to create an educational system parallel to that of the United States. The problem of memorization, which was raised, pertains mainly to the madrassas (Koranic schools), which must be reformed.

An observer wondered how the United States could help in reforming primary and secondary education in the Muslim world. A participant answered that America can do several practical things. One would involve revising school books. Iraq, for instance, presents a perfect opportunity for that. Local experts should participate in the process that must involve an antiauthoritarian philosophy. Also, teacher training colleges should play a key role in organizing debates about given issues. Another thing Americans can do is help stop the brain drain from Muslim (and third-world) countries. Educated people should be given incentives to remain in their countries. Incentives should not be confined to economic inducement; most people leave the third world because their countries are authoritarian, and the authorities brutalize intelligent people who are not docile and do not accept what governments say. Political reforms are therefore essential.

It seemed to another participant that the Osama bin Ladens of the Muslim world have taken over the educational system

and driven the intelligentsia out. In a way, this has preserved the role of the intelligentsia who will constitute the bridge between the West and the Muslim world when they go back to their countries of origin to help reform the educational systems. The problem, which stems from centuries of stagnation in the Muslim world, is one of education. America can be blamed partly because it supported a number of repressive governments in the context of the cold war against communism. But since the demise of the Soviet Union, supporting countries like Saudi Arabia, in which the most fundamentalist and literal interpretation of religion is professed, has spread rigid and radical Islamism. Fundamentalism may not cause decline, but decline causes fundamentalism. It is a vicious cycle: fundamentalism-decline-further fundamentalism. In breaking this cycle, Iraq will play a pivotal role. Also, it will be a seminal project for the United States. This participant said that he was working on educational projects for Iraq with the Institute of International Education, a nonprofit organization that administers the Fulbright program. He cited the American University of Beirut as probably the only university in the Middle East that encourages free thought. He added that Iraq will become a case study for the introduction of human rights, civil society, and the integration of women in their rightful roles in Muslim societies.

In addressing the question of fundamentalism, a panelist said that in his opinion, it was a part of the educational and developmental crisis that exists in the Muslim world. This crisis is much more complicated than it appears because it involves religion that is part of the identity of the people in that part of the world. It might take a very long time to solve the problems of the Muslim world, he concluded.

## **Mobility**

A participant remarked that Muslim societies were law abiding and law oriented in the past. Therefore, there is a tradition of observing the law. It is the content of the law that should be changed. The decline of the Muslim world is illustrated by the lack of mobility. While Islam was flourishing, people were free to go anywhere they liked. Today things are different. A major thinker in such countries as Iran, Sudan, and Egypt is immobile; he cannot speak or leave; he is threatened; he is under pressure. What he needs are institutions that can provide security for him to speak out. One way of enhancing mobility would be to use Muslim experts who are unemployed in many countries. This participant cited the example of Afghanistan.

Americans hesitate to send their own people to build clinics, for instance, because of the risks posed by the cultural clash. Experts from other Muslim countries might be used. This would reestablish mobility in the Muslim world for scientists and specialists. For example, how can an Iranian cleric who thinks that human rights are compatible with Islam enter into a discussion with a Saudi colleague opposed to his ideas? Mobility is the key. In this domain, the United States, with its numerous institutions and think tanks, can play an essential role.

### **The Language of Art**

A panelist stressed the importance of the “language” of art—a common language understandable to everyone. In his opinion, art constitutes one more area in which the United States can help. Drawing on its important and large film industry, it should produce films that promote the ideas of democracy, tolerance, and pluralism and export them to Muslim countries.

On the same subject, another participant said that one of the best things that can be done is to encourage the arts in general in the Muslim Arab world where a concentration on the arts has been missing in the past few decades. Like other developing countries, the Muslim world has been focused on science, lending credence to the notion that everyone not graduating in the sciences is a failure. Yet art is very important to the development of every society. The participant added that the question of art ties in with the question of women because art is one of the few fields in which women have a voice in the Muslim and Arab worlds. One finds many examples of women writers, artists, poets, and film directors. Civil society in most Muslim and Arab countries has been suffocated through the combined efforts of the government on one side and religious extremists on the other. In trying to outdo the extremists, governments have bent over backward to prove their religiosity. They have given power to the most conservative interpretations of religion. This trend has fortified censorship. Art encourages the flourishing of the soul. By promoting the arts, one not only encourages women to speak out more but also validates civil society.

### **Nongovernmental Organizations**

An observer remarked that no democracy can be sustained without three sectors: government, business, and the nonprofit sector, which includes religious, educational, and other organizations. The observer said that in Iran, before the Islamic Revolution, some of the most outstanding women leaders were mem-

bers of the Iranian Girl Scout organization and its international umbrella. In wondering aloud what had happened to those women leaders, the observer said that the U.S. deputy secretary of state for global affairs has constituted a small working group to look at the status of women in postconflict societies. The present focus of this working group is Afghanistan and how to build resource centers for women throughout the country. Another observer said that this was an example of grassroots movements and developing values of sharing, participation, and concern about society. Such nongovernmental organizations help to create respect for human values and democracy.

A panelist said that a few years ago he was involved with an organization called Search for Common Ground that had invited nongovernmental organizations from Iran to participate in a roundtable in Washington, D.C. To his surprise representatives from 10 organizations, 3 headed by women, showed up. The women stated that they had established their agencies with no assistance from the government. The panelist added that according to his information, nongovernmental organizations in which women are participating are sprouting up in many fields in Iran.

### **Some Obstacles**

One panelist asserted that the real question is not how to reform Islam but how to reform Muslims. In his opinion, there is no causal relationship between the principles of Islam and certain actions undertaken by some Muslims. An observer remarked that this was exactly the thinking of the administration. From the first day of the war against terrorism, the president has stressed that this is not a war against Islam but against terrorists.

Alluding to the anti-American resentment in the Muslim world, a participant said that it could be linked with Muslims' religious sensibility. Attributing the lack of development in the Muslim world to certain interpretations of the Koran will have counterproductive effects. If Islam is criticized, it will hurt the "dignity" of Muslims. If Islam is treated as the enemy, then Islam will become America's enemy. Islam is not the enemy of science, tolerance, and pluralism. Islam is no barrier to development. A reform of not only the Muslim world but also of the relationship of the United States with that world is needed. The introduction of democracy in the Muslim world would not bring a solution of existing problems. On the contrary, it might solidify the obstacles. Thus, for example, it could strengthen anti-Israeli

sentiments and make peace more difficult in the Middle East. The problems are more complicated than they appear to be. The participant added that imposing liberal democracy on Muslims is the wrong thing to do. Muslims say they can develop a kind of “open society” in the context of the Koran because the sacred text provides for it. Thus there is a “disconnect” between what American experts and many Muslim scholars say.

Several participants remarked that nobody had said that Islam *per se* is a hurdle to development. Many others stated that the roundtable’s agenda includes, among other things, the report of Arab experts on human development. That report cites as obstacles to development the political system, gender differences, the educational organization of the Arab world, not the religion. In any case, complaints about Islamic sensibility, the war against terrorism, and related subjects are not on the agenda of the roundtable.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

A panelist recommended a kind of educational Marshall Plan aimed at creating universities and spreading the liberal arts in the Muslim world. He also recommended the use of as many American Muslims as possible to carry out such a plan in order to expedite the return of people who felt impelled to seek abroad opportunities that were not available at home. The panelist proposed the imposition of a total arms embargo on the third world, which spends less than 6 percent on education and more than 20 percent on defense. The IMF and the World Bank should put a cap on the defense budgets of those countries when they give them loans. The United States should encourage American professors who are interested in the region to initiate large-scale summer school programs in the area. That would allow them and their students to share their experiences and understanding of America with young Muslims. In the opinion of the participant, the promotion of “south-south trade” (among the countries of the region) would help bring peace to the region. The development of tourism among Muslim countries would also prove helpful in the promotion of democratic ideas. In this respect, the panelist explained that where the “Hanafi school of thought”\* prevails (Bangladesh, Turkey, and other countries), one finds some kinds of democratic forms, whereas in countries professing the “Hanbali school of thought” (Saudi Arabia, for instance), authoritarianism dominates. In effect, bringing together Muslims from various regions should have a diluting effect in “fundamentalist” areas. Finally, the panelist explored

the implications of the lack of “intimidation-free” public spheres where Muslims can debate and compete. The West can provide an environment, in the form of a universitylike setting or a summer camp, for Muslim intellectuals from every part of the world. One panelist endorsed the recommendation to encourage the arts in the Muslim world, and another panelist expanded on the notion that there is a “disconnection” between Muslim countries. Iranians know next to nothing about Arab intellectuals and vice versa. He backed the proposal that the United States provide venues for Muslim intellectuals to meet and discuss ideas freely. Television channels in individual Muslim countries fail to provide information about what is going on in other Muslim countries. The participant expressed the hope that American foundations will provide funds for the production of films and TV programs aimed at connecting the intellectual world of Arabs, Iranians, and Turks. Other panelists reiterated their suggestions about translating the Western classics into Arabic and other languages used in Muslim countries. One panelist added that translations of books from diverse Muslim countries should become available to other Muslim countries and to the West.

A panelist reiterated the importance of freedom to reform and human development in Muslim countries. Another panelist doubted that freedom will be the solution. Establishing freedom overnight in Saudi Arabia, he said, would allow bin Laden to return and triumph in free elections. A free democratic Muslim world in the immediate future would enhance anti-Americanism. A participant said that he was not opposed to the free election of an Islamist government in a Muslim country provided that opponents could stand for elections, speak freely, and participate in the political process. What is important, he said, is to separate theology and politics in discussions. Otherwise, one could not discuss real political issues.

One participant referred to the role of “shame” in cultures by citing the example of a gang rape that happened in Pakistan. The possible reason the Pakistani government was driven to act might have been the media coverage the assault provoked in the West. The authorities wanted to “look good.” The participant also cited the example of some Iranian women who lobbied against stoning as a punishment for adultery. Assuming that they could not get the male clerics to change their minds on the basis of international human rights conventions, they said that the practice of stoning makes Islam look bad in the world. The



use of shame was the way to get the clerics to do something positive.

A panelist said that the United States, standing for the West, has a key role to play in the human development of the Muslim world. It should project in its foreign policy an image consistent with the democratic values it represents and wants to spread.

At the end of the discussion, each panelist was invited to make one recommendation to U.S. authorities:

In Iraq, help in the formation of a provisional government that will write a constitution and set up a pluralist regime.

In Afghanistan and Iraq, build enduring, useful institutions that future generations will judge to be positive contributions made by the United States.

In Iraq, include women in the new government.

In Iraq, build democratic institutions and a civil society.

Make a commitment to Iraq and to the whole region that is comparable to the commitment that the United States made to Western Europe after World War II.

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\* Four schools of thought and jurisprudence were developed in the Muslim world in the 8th century. Named after their founders, they were called *maliki*, *hanafi*, *shafii*, and *hanbali*. The hanafi school is the most tolerant, and the hanbali is the most orthodox.

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